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"This neat, finely tuned, hypersensitive film examines the outside and inside of a banal prefab classroom, stares at an asymmetrical space so undistinguished that it's hard to believe the whole movie is confined to it, and has this neck-jerking camera gimmick that hits a wooden stop arm at each end of its swing. Basically it's a perpetual motion film that ingeniously builds a sculptural effect by insisting on time-motion to the point where the camera's swinging arcs and white wall field assume the hardness, the dimensions of a concrete beam. "In such a hard, drilling work, the wooden clap sounds are a terrific invention, and, as much as any single element, create the sculpture. Seeming to thrust the image outward off the screen, these clap effects are timed like a metronome, sometimes occurring with torrential frequency." - Manny Farber, *Artforum*, 1970

1968-1969, 16mm, 52m, \$135

#### MORE ON 'BACK AND FORTH'

Type: Features

Rating: NR

Running Time: 52 Minutes

Directed by: [Michael Snow](#)

## Back and Forth

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1969

#### PLOT DESCRIPTION

Like his most famous film *Wavelength*, Michael Snow's *Back and Forth* uses a specific formal/mechanical property of the cinematic apparatus (in this case, horizontal and vertical panning) to sever the link between the camera and what it depicts. In narrative cinema, the camera's movements are dictated by the action it is filming. In *Back and Forth* the reverse is true. For the first 35 minutes, the camera

repeatedly pans across a classroom where incidents that echo its movement occasionally occur: a janitor sweeps the floor; a couple pass a ball between them, etc. The velocity of the panning gradually increases until the room becomes a blur, at which point the film abruptly cuts to equally rapid vertical pans which gradually slow down throughout the rest of the film. *Back and Forth* plays with the idea of the camera as a metaphor for consciousness. [Snow](#) emphasizes this by making that consciousness independent -- capable of instigating its own actions instead of simply recording what happens in front of it. ~ Tom Vick, All Movie Guide

# “Too Busy Making Work!”

Honoring Michael Snow at the □  
2004 Thessaloniki Film Festival

Painter, photographer, sculptor, composer, musician — □  
and here, seminal experimental filmmaker

BY [CLEO CACOULIDIS](#)

Watching the films of Michael Snow requires a fair degree of intellectual focus, not to mention patience. From his early investigations of “pure film space and light” to his latest computer-generated digital feature where he squeezes and stretches images with funhouse abandon, this Canadian native has been engaging and provoking audiences for nearly half a century.

“I want to make physical things so that the experience is a real experience and not just conceptual,” Snow has remarked. “Of course, there are ideas in the works, but they are also body affects, like the panning in **Back and Forth** (*right*), for example. Some of my films have caused riots, fights, all kinds of things. People have fainted viewing **La Region Centrale**. So I must be doing something right.”

Indeed. During last year’s 44th Thessaloniki International Film Festival, spectators were treated to a retrospective of Snow’s films, a veritable psychological and physiological banquet. Expanding on the screenings was a select exhibition of the artist’s sculptures, photography, and video installations at the Macedonian Museum of Modern Art. Together the two offerings reflected the discipline, and humor, of this thoroughly modern Renaissance artist.

Known as a structuralist filmmaker, Snow's work takes as its main subject matter the physical aspects of film: camera, light, projection, celluloid. His experiential works require the viewer's active collaboration — repetitive, often abstract imagery and dissonant sound reconfigure and test the elements of perception. "The two basic components that one has to work with in making cinema are duration and light," says Snow. "This, to me, is essential. I try to work with things that are specific to the medium so that the spectator has an experience that can only come from that particular means."

It is in the duration of the events filmed that Snow establishes his high level of interactivity with the viewer. And nowhere is this more evident than in **Wavelength** (1967, *right*), a 45-minute intermittent forward zoom taken at slightly altered camera positions in a loft. Briefly men and women enter and exit the frame, triggering the pretense of a narrative. But in reality, the viewer becomes increasingly absorbed in the purpose of the zoom and where it's heading. **Wavelength** ends on a photograph of the sea that has been placed flat on a wall between two windows. On the soundtrack we hear, among other things, a sine wave. The sound begins as a low buzzing, increasing in volume until the wave reaches its highest note of 1,200 cycles per second, the aural equivalent of nails on a chalkboard. Textural changes also occur, including radical and subtle color shifts, black-and-white shots, visible splices, and turns from day to night.

One of the most discussed avant-garde films, **Wavelength** has frequently been described as a metaphor for consciousness. Snow refers to it as a "summation of my nervous system, religious inklings and esthetic ideas." Whatever one's view of the work, clearly it has extended the cinematic possibilities of temporality and space.

Experiments with perception continue in Snow's other work, such as **Back and Forth** (1969), an incessant panning of a classroom for 50 minutes with a rhythmic soundtrack that resembles a ticking

clock; **La Region Centrale** (1971), an unorthodox 3-hour meditation on landscape where a specially devised camera moves continuously in every conceivable direction and at different speeds in an attempt to mimic the spherical motions of the sun, moon, and Earth; and **Corpus Callosum** (2002, *above*), a digital piece that transforms a modern office space into a looping mobius strip of workstations while also focusing on a “living room” filled with animated people and objects.

At 75, Snow has sustained a creative energy and outpouring that would be the envy of any artist. Currently, he is working on a new film built around the idea of a different image on each frame. He also continues to perform in concert — he is a noted jazz pianist. When I asked him about his thoughts on the new generation of avant-garde filmmakers, he smiled and confessed, “I’m sorry to say, I don’t see many films. I’m simply too busy making work.”

Thessaloniki International Film Festival is held annually in mid-November in Greece’s second-largest city. Emphasizing artistic rather than commercial fare, the festival promotes mostly young, independent [directors](#) (the international competition is open to first and second features only) while also highlighting East European and Balkan cinema. Visit the festival’s official site in English [here](#).